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A MEMOIR

I: THE ACCIDENT

On the Fourth of July, 1946, driving on a hot afternoon on a flat straight road through the cornfields of Iowa, my father fell asleep at the wheel and went off the road long enough to hit a sidewall over a culvert that sheared off the right side of the car, killing my mother and sister.

My father's nose was broken and his forehead was cut. When a highway patrol came by, he was wandering by the wreckage, bleeding and dazed. I was inside, in a coma from a concussion, with a large gash on the left side of my forehead. I had been sitting on the floor of the back seat, on a suitcase covered with a blanket, with my head just behind the driver's seat. When the car hit my head was thrown against a metal fixture on the back of the seat, knocking me out and opening up a large triangular flap of skin on my forehead. My legs had been stretched out in front of me across the car and my right leg was broken just above the knee.

We were on a stretch of road between Davenport, Iowa, and Des Moines, on our way from Detroit to Denver for a vacation with my mother's relatives. An ambulance took my father and me to a hospital in Davenport, where I stayed in coma for 36 hours.

My brother Harry read about the accident the next morning on the front page of the Detroit Free Press. He took a plane to Chicago that afternoon and then a bus to Davenport. He said later that when he saw what was left of the car in a junkyard, the right side looked like steel wool. It was amazing that anyone had survived.

As a Christian Scientist, my father didn't want any medical attention for either of us. He didn't have anything done to his broken nose, and he wouldn't let the doctors set my broken knee or stitch up my forehead. He had a gash on his own cheek he didn't want touched, but at one point when he drifted out of consciousness my brother told the doctors to go ahead and stitch him up. Harry says that Dad never forgave him for that.

When my mother's brother and sister arrived from Denver, they insisted that my leg be set, but by then it was somewhat crooked and had to be broken again to be set properly when I was moved to a hospital in Denver. The surgeon there, a knee specialist, told me that if it had never been set correctly my right leg would have been about an inch and a half shorter than my left.

After I got off crutches later I didn't have trouble walking, but I could never bend my right knee all the way. I had to get special approval from a surgeon to get into the Marine Corps. In the Marines I was excused from firing in the kneeling position on the rifle range, which improved my qualifying scores considerably because that was a hard position for everybody.

Because my head wasn't stitched up till my uncle and aunt arrived, I was left with a large jagged U-shaped scar on my left forehead. I thought it looked interesting so I didn't mind it.

Until recently, whenever anyone asked me how old I was when the accident happened, I would say, "Fourteen." But I knew that there tended to be something wrong with that answer, so I would do a mental calculation. I knew that the accident happened a year after the war, and I was born in 1931. So I would correct my answer to fifteen.

Fourteen was the age of my sister at the time of the accident. She was 11 months younger.

As a friend of mine, a scholarly student of trauma, pointed out recently when I described that recurrent mistake to her, it raises some unusual questions for me to ask myself. In my mind: Who was it who died in the accident that day, and who survived? Who should have died, who was supposed to survive? Who am I, now? Did I die? Am I alive, or dead?

My father told me a story a number of times that bore on all this. He said that all that morning Gloria had been sitting up front, next to him as he drove. Both of us wanted to sit there, because you could look out the window and it was more comfortable than sitting on the suitcases on the floor in back. It was going to be my turn to sit next to the driver in the afternoon, after lunch.

Mother had packed a picnic lunch and we ate it in a little park in the middle of a town in Iowa between Davenport and Des Moines. I remember that. It was very hot and dry, there was a statue and white walls, looking out on a little square surrounded by stores. The park was just an enclosed space between two intersecting streets at the center of town.

We ate sandwiches, just the four of us, sitting on a patch of grass next to a stone bench. There were no other people there, or in the square. It was midday on the Fourth of July, the stores were closed and maybe everyone was at a celebration somewhere else.

What Dad would tell me was that after lunch we were packing up to go and Gloria ran back to the car first and got in the front seat and wouldn't move out of it, although it was my turn to sit there. She was determined to be there again. As Dad told it she insisted firmly: "I'm going to sit here if it kills me."

Dad's voice always started to break as he told that, he would begin to cry, tears running down the sides of his nose and down his cheeks as he said,

with his voice in a thin, cracking falsetto: "And it did kill her, too." Then he would break down into sobs, gulping and choking, as he repeated, "It did kill her. She died, poor little girl.."

It has occurred to me fairly recently that I may have listened to his emotional account with mixed feelings, more than I was aware of at the time, about its meanings for him and for me.

On the one hand, it was a dramatic and horrifying story, and it was easy to see why it would break him up. Whether she had really said that or not. Dad was a good story-teller, and he made up. He always invented dialog that improved the drama, and came to believe it as far as you could tell. Of course it was a fact that she was sitting up front that afternoon in the "death seat" next to the driver, and that I would have wanted a turn to sit there.

But in telling me (I didn't have any memory of it one way or the other) that it had been my turn after lunch, he was saying that the real "accident" as far as I was concerned had been that Gloria was sitting there instead of me when the car crashed. That was only because of her fortuitous willfulness--which wasn't characteristic of her, as far as I can remember--and her getting away with it. This is pretty close to saying, "You were supposed to die, not Gloria. It was your turn. She took it."

Was that what he was crying about? Would he have cared as much, would he have broken up the same way if I had taken my place in the front seat, and he was telling the story to Gloria? Probably. I guess. I would like to think so.

I do know that from the time of the accident on, a thought that used to recur to me at odd times was: "I owe a life." Just that: a thought in my head, not a voice. No context, no why. I didn't know where it came from, I don't even remember connecting it with the accident. (If I had, it wouldn't have had to do only, or even mainly, with Gloria,. It was Mother's death). It wasn't even

clear what it meant to owe a life. It was a kind of free-floating command, an obligation. It told me: At some point, I must pay my debt. But how did you do that?

I know that after that I never expected to live long. I had the feeling that I was on borrowed time, which was good in some ways. I had a few good years ahead, free, I should enjoy them. I did.

The story about Gloria was at the end of Dad's account to me of what led up to the accident. I heard that a number of times over the years, always the same way, so I remember it word for word:

"Adele was determined that we had to be in Denver by the 6th of July, because her brother Lou was giving a party on the 7th. A cocktail party, for Christ's sake! [After becoming Christian Scientists my father and mother never touched alcohol]. She wanted to meet all Lou's friends. So we would have to be driving on the Fourth of July, and we'd have to leave the night before.

"I was chief structural engineer on the new Philadelphia Inquirer building in Philadelphia. I was designing floors that would bear the weight of the heaviest rotogravure presses in the world, on an upper story. They called me at the last minute before I was going on vacation and said I had to get out there. I got hardly any sleep and I spent all my time at the site. When I got back from Philadelphia on the afternoon of the 3rd, I was exhausted. I knew I couldn't go that night. We would just have to leave the next day. I needed to rest.

"But Adele said we had to go. There was no way we could get there in time for the party unless we got started that night. Then she asked me to help load the car. She was supposed to have had the car all loaded when I got back. But now she said I had to do it. July in Detroit, it was hotter than hell, I

was exhausted from my trip, and I was lugging her sewing machine out to the car, trying to squeeze it in the trunk, laying suitcases down on the floor of the back seat so you kids would have a place to sit while she stretched out her legs on the back seat.”

I realized, as he told me this, why she had to have her legs out on the seat: her varicose veins, that she never had treated by a doctor because she was a Christian Scientist. The suppurating sores on her ankles; she needed them elevated. That's why I was sitting on the floor, with my back to the left side of the car, instead of sitting beside her facing front. Who knows, maybe that saved my life.

"So finally that night we got going. Adele had it figured out we were going to drive from Detroit to the shores of Lake Michigan, where we were going to sleep out on the beach. Some friend of hers had told her you could do that, camp on the sand. That was another wonderful thing. Your mother was supposed to have made motel reservations for us, but she forgot till too late, and it was impossible to find a motel vacancy the night before the Fourth of July. So she got this idea that we could sleep on the sand. We brought blankets for that.

"That night I didn't sleep a wink. I wasn't asleep for a minute. It got too cold, and the sand was cold under the blankets. After a while your mother and Gloria got into the car, and they were able to sleep. But I couldn't sleep at all.”

I remember that night very clearly. I was lying outside next to my father, on top of a blanket and under another one, looking up at the stars. It was a clear night and we were on the shore of Lake Michigan, far from any lights or smog. The sky was filled with stars. I had never seen so many in my life and maybe never have again. And every few minutes, one of them would streak across the sky, like a dying rocket. It was a night of falling stars, all night. I would drift to sleep, my eyes would blur and close, and then they would open again later and see another bright star fall.

"When we got going the next morning after breakfast--your mother had at least remembered to pack some food for breakfast and lunch--I was worried that I wouldn't be able to keep going. It was hotter than hell by the middle of the morning, and the road got flat and straight. We were going through cornfields, endless fields, all the same. It would have been hard to keep my eyes focused even if I had had some sleep, and I hadn't.

"So I said to Adele, 'We're just going to have to look for a motel and stop. They'll have vacancies during the day, even if it is the Fourth of July. I have to get some sleep.' She said no, that was impossible. We had a tight schedule, if we were going to get to Denver on time, and we had to keep it.

"We weren't running into any motels anyway. But I was getting tired and tired. It was getting hard to keep my eyes open. Finally I said, 'OK, I'll just have to pull over and nap for a while.'

"And she said, 'We don't have time for that. We won't get there in time for the party if we stop.'

"I said, 'Then you'll have to take over the driving, while I sleep in the car.' She said no, she wouldn't do that. She had said from the beginning that she wasn't going to do any driving, I would have to do it all. She had to be fresh when she got to Denver, for the party."

He drove on. Just after our picnic lunch, his eyes closed on the road to Des Moines, and the right wheels went off the pavement onto gravel. That woke him up, and he remembers seeing Gloria looking up at him with a puzzled look on her face, as if to ask what was wrong. He tried to get the car back on the highway, but the rough edge of the pavement tore out the inside of the right rear tire (as the highway patrol concluded afterward, from the blown tire and the skid marks) and the wheels couldn't get back onto the cement before the right side of the car plowed into a concrete sidewalk that was flush with the

highway, above a culvert.

My father had been a highway engineer in Nebraska. He said that highway walls should never have been flush with the road like that, and later laws tended to ban it, but this one just took off the side of the car where my mother and Gloria were sitting, Gloria looking forward and my mother facing left with her back to the side of the car.

A day and a half after the accident, I woke up in a white hospital room. Everything was white, the bed I was on, the bandages on my legs, the walls, the light. It must have been the middle of the night, I had been in coma for 36 hours; there were doctors and nurses in white around my bed. It was like an operating room. Perhaps they were putting my leg in traction.

Someone said, "You've been in an accident. You're lucky to be alive. Your father is OK." I asked about my mother and sister. Someone told me they were dead.

The thought came into my head: "Now I won't have to be a pianist." I said nothing. A nurse said, "You're a brave boy." Then I was unconscious again.

II: THE PIANO

In 1960 my former wife Carol and I were seeing a marriage counselor in Los Angeles. He was a Baptist minister assigned to us at the Institute of Family Relations, which provided the case materials for the column, "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" in The Ladies Home Journal, which is how I got the idea for the counseling. Each of us saw him separately three times, then once together.

Toward the start of my second session, the counselor asked me what my childhood was like. I thought back to the playhouse, cherry trees in the backyard, kicking leaves, picnics, Barber Elementary School. "I had a happy childhood," I said. "It was pretty ordinary. Normal."

"There wasn't anything unusual about it? No problems?" He had just seen my wife, who had briefed him.

"Problems? No, I don't think of any." I thought for a moment. Then I said, "Well, I guess there was one thing sort of unusual...you could say unusual...I played the piano all the time."

"What do you mean 'all the time'?"

"Well, I only went to grade school half days, so I could practice in the afternoon. I practiced four to six hours a day for the last several years in grade school. And later in high school, I couldn't practice that much weekdays so I would practice twelve hours on Saturdays..."

He was grinning, and I started to laugh: "OK, yeah, hmm..."

It had been a long time since I had thought about it much. No one in college, except maybe Carol, had ever heard me play, and the same in England, the Marines and graduate school, and now in California.

All right, it was unusual. My practicing started when I was five, on a paper keyboard laid out on the dining room table, because we didn't have a piano yet. Lessons were from a lady next door, who had confirmed my mother's growing suspicion that I had musical talent. She had noticed that I seemed to have a sense of rhythm, even when I was two or three, and that I would hum along with the radio. These were stories I often heard later, when there was talk about my vocation as a pianist.

From the time I was six or seven, I was a pianist. Piano was my life, my obsession, my calling. It was my fate, my good fortune. No one was making me be a pianist. My parents, especially my mother, recognizing my gift, my talent, were giving me very opportunity to develop it. That was how I understood it.

Her sister Clara and brother Lou paid for lessons and a piano. Mother found me a teacher, the most well-known in town. She arranged for my grade school to let me off school half-days so that I could practice in the afternoons. She took it on herself to make sure I did my practicing, like a trainer, to help me conquer my own little-boy tendencies to slack off. We knew, I didn't really doubt it though I was tempted sometimes to forget it, that a talent for the piano that wasn't pursued every day from the age of five would dry up.

Every time I played in a recital, grown-ups from the audience, friends of my parents from church or Dad's office, would come up to me and say how lucky I was to have parents who were giving me this opportunity. They would say, "If only my mother had made me practice longer! How I wish I could play now! You will be so grateful to them later, for supporting you like this. I hope you appreciate what they're doing for you now." I didn't have any reservations when I heard this, over and over, except that I didn't really need to be told, it went without saying. I had grown up knowing it. I had never had any questions about it, as far as I could remember.

Mother was a pianist herself, which is how she was able to recognize my talent so early, and why she was willing to commit herself to nurturing it. But she hadn't started at five, which is when most serious pianists start. She had taken lessons in her late teens, and had managed to become quite good, which was very unusual with such a late start. She had even thought seriously about a career as a pianist, it had been her greatest ambition, but it just didn't seem practical. But she was in love with the piano. I always knew that, listening to her play in the rare moments when I wasn't at the keyboard myself, when she would take time off from housework and from studying the Science and Health.

And she played very well, I could tell as I got older and more skilled myself. She played, many times, a Rachmaninov Prelude, and some Chopin etudes and scherzos. The fact was--I realized many years later long after I had quit--she was a better pianist than I ever became, and the pieces she was playing were more difficult than any I was then capable of.

What kept me from realizing that at the time was that she had a romantic style, which I heard and later remembered as feminine and sentimental and even sloppy. It involved among other things playing chords in the two hands slightly unevenly, the left hand hitting the keys a little before the right, along with frequent changes in tempo. It was very much later, after she died, that I heard old recordings from the twenties and earlier and realized that was the traditional style of the best male pianists of her day.

I was learning a much more rigid, hands-together, even-tempo, classical style from a disciplinarian literally from Prussia, Margaret M---. She was short and plump, with glasses and a piggish face, and bright red died hair in a braid coiled on top of her head. When you made a mistake repeatedly or didn't follow her directions she would clench her hand into a fist with the knuckle of the middle finger protruding and ram it furiously into the muscle of your forearm as you played, left or right depending on which side of you she was standing. It was painful the first time and excruciating after that, when she hit the same spot over and over.

Mother and I would be sitting, twice a week, in the dim hall outside her studio at the Detroit Institute of Musical Art, waiting for my lesson, and time after time one or another stocky girl would emerge from the lesson ahead of me nursing purple-blue bruises on her forearm, tears running down her cheeks. Then it was our turn to go in.

I don't think I got hit as often as the girls ahead of us, I was better than they were, but I can remember waiting for the first hit, trying not to flinch when I heard myself making a mistake or repeating it. Mother would sit in a chair behind the piano during the lesson and she would often cry silently as she saw me grimacing with pain when the same spot got hit again. But she never said anything in protest. Miss M--- was the teacher, and I was on scholarship.

I was auditioned by Miss M---, who had the most students in town, when I was about seven. She was the accompanist for the Detroit Symphony. She said I had promise, and she took me at half-price, \$3.50 a lesson I think. Even that was more than my father could afford twice a week, and Mother got the money for years from her older sister, who had a jewelry store in Denver.

As a scholarship student my lessons were at odd times, usually at Miss M---'s lunch hour. Twice a week my mother would pick me up outside Barber School just before classes broke for lunch and drive me downtown to the Detroit Institute of Musical Art, an old red-brick building at the edge of the Art Center where the huge marble Detroit Library and the Art Museum were located. I would eat my lunch, a sandwich in wax paper and a carton of milk, in the backseat of the Plymouth while we drove.

Miss M--- would make her lunch on a hotplate in the closet of the studio and eat it during the lesson, usually a disgusting-smelling (not Campbell's) tomato soup. She would often be in a rayon bathrobe, for some reason, during these sessions, perhaps relaxing during the lunch hour. She would stand by the piano, keeping time with gestures of one hand, sipping her soup, the sharp smell of which made me slightly sick, from a metal mug.

Occasionally she would reach over me to mark something on the music or to correct my hand position, and on hot summer days I would smell the sweat from her armpits, combined with her cheap perfume and face-powder. The smells had their effect on me as I passed puberty, and several times I had fantasies of wrapping my arms around her, throwing her to the floor and taking her, if my mother hadn't been present. I was disgusted at myself for thinking of it, she was so piggish, but she was the only woman who got that close to me.

Almost forty years later I ran into someone from Detroit who told me that Miss M--- had died not long before, in a terrible way. She had been making soup on her hotplate and her long red-dyed hair, undone, had caught on fire, the fire spreading to her bathrobe. She had burned to death, apparently in agony. As I was told this, I found a delicious glow of warmth spreading down across my body from the top of my head to the tips of my fingers and down my legs. I know exactly how that sounds, and all I can say is that I've never reacted that way to the death or misfortune of anyone else in the world. I had no premonition I would respond like that, or any notion that I had had, or still had, any strong feeling about my old piano teacher.

For all that, she was a pretty good teacher, except that all her teaching was oriented entirely toward recitals. Her students didn't learn to sight-read or cover a wide repertoire; we practiced over and over the limited number of pieces we were going to perform in the next recital. Each of these we learned note by note, slowly, trying to get each note right from the start. As a later teacher explained to me--as he was aborting my career as a professional--this was not the right training for a concert pianist, and almost none of her students actually did go on to such success. But we didn't realize that for the decade I took lessons from her.

Another problem was the amount of practicing she demanded. When I was eight or nine I was practicing three hours a day, which soon went up to four. In about the fourth grade, Mother talked to the principal of my local grade

school, Barber School, and a woman was sent to our house to give me an IQ test. I remember it lasting for several hours, arranging blocks and weights and answering questions. I never learned the score, my mother said the parents weren't told either, but after that the school permitted me to attend only half days, in the mornings, so that I could practice all afternoon every weekday.

Sports and activities were mostly in the afternoon, so I missed all that, and I couldn't play with the other kids after school, because I was still practicing. By the time I left Barber when I was twelve, I was practicing six hours a day.

All this on a handful of pieces, for the next recital. Plus exercises. Note by note, measure by measure, over and over, a metronome measuring out the beat, gradually, very gradually, getting faster. Keyboard exercises to strengthen the fingers and wrists, repeated till they ached with pain, then repeated some more. The hard parts, hands separately, hands together, over and over and over.

Some of it was fun. There were so infinitely many choices to be made: where to put the accent in a phrase, how to finger it, how much pressure to put on a key, shading what voice to bring out in a chord progression, subtle pauses and delays. Listening to the sound of the beautiful parts fill the room. My mother had beautiful hands, pianist's hands, and it seemed to me that I did too. I looked at them in mirrors.

I loved to read, but there just wasn't time for it. There wasn't time for anything but practicing. Almost any moment that I wasn't on the piano bench, whatever I was doing except eating meals or going to the bathroom had a faintly guilty tinge to it, a feeling that I should be in front of the keyboard instead of doing what I was doing. Time for reading was stolen. Sometimes I read in bed at night under the covers, with a flashlight. I have a feeling every child does that sometimes, once they get into reading, but not every child has books disappear on them if they seem too absorbed.

I remember very clearly going into to the living room once where the rest of the family was gathered, to ask, "Has anyone seen my copy of Little Women? I can't find it anywhere." I searched all over the house, but it had vanished, right in the middle of a chapter. I was infatuated with Jo. It must have been summer, or I wouldn't have been reading it during the day anyway. A month or so later, after I had given up on finding it, I was poking in the laundry hamper for some reason, and astonishingly, Little Women appeared at the bottom under the dirty clothes. I remember the moment well. I raised it high and raced through the house, waving it and yelling, "I found it! I found Little Women!...How did it get into the clothes hamper?"

And I tore into it right that afternoon from where I had left off. It had to be summer, still. I must have practiced all that morning, or I couldn't have read a page. But within a few hours, a few chapters later, I put it down for a moment to get something from the kitchen, and when I came back it had dematerialized, never to be found again. I kept looking for a long time, but it never turned up. I don't think I ever fully suspected what had happened to it. I know I never accused anyone.

Much the same happened with a book my older half-brother had read first, Pearl Diver, and with Court Luckner, The Sea Devil, by Lowell Thomas, about a German raider against British merchant shipping in the First World War, which pretended to be a merchant sailing vessel until it uncovered its hidden guns. For a long time I could remember many episodes from each of those up to the point where they had disappeared.

Our annual recitals were held in June, in a red brick building owned by the Detroit Federation of Women's Clubs. June in Detroit was hot, and humid. There was no air conditioning then and the windows were open in the afternoons when we rehearsed, but the air outside and in was like steam heating set to the highest level. The white keys on the piano were slippery with sweat.

Sometimes when I was waiting my turn I went down to the basement, where it was damp and cool. Under the staircase was a table covered with piles and piles of old Readers' Digests, twenty or thirty years' worth, complete sets bound with twine. The copies were cool and slightly damp with mildew. I would slip the string off a year's collection and begin to compare issues closely, to see which would be the most rewarding to smuggle home.

I could only take two or at most three, one or two under my shirt and belt in front and one in back. So I had to choose carefully. I would look to see what books had been condensed (I remember one by Anne Morrow Lindbergh), and I glanced through the joke pages and the articles, especially the feature, "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Ever Met." I would get the choice down to five or six, usually from different years, then down to two or three, which I put aside before I bound the piles up again.

When the rehearsal was over and we were ready to leave, I would slip down to the basement again and stuff the Digests under my clothes, pull my belt tight and walk carefully out to the car. The magazines were cool against my stomach and back, and stiffened my posture. When I got home I hid them away. In the summer there were hours of daylight when I wasn't practicing and I read the Digests cover to cover. Stealing those Readers' Digests and reading them, a couple every year for five or six years, was one of the best memories of my childhood. I never got caught. It was the only theft I can remember committing in my life, other than palming a few corks from a tray at Woolworth's when I was about ten to see it if could be done. That, and copying the Pentagon Papers.

When it came time for the recital, on a June evening, half an hour or so before it was my turn to play I would go down to the men's room and soak my

hands in a washbasin filled with water as hot as I could make it. If it was too hot to start with, I would yank my hands out and run cold water over them and into the basin, then put my hands back in. When I got used to the temperature, I would make it hotter, till it seemed near boiling [It was interesting for me to see David Helfgott doing this before he performed, in the movie Shine]. It was to make my fingers more limber.

I rubbed my hands together under water, clenched them, grasped each finger in turn and massaged it, pressed the upper knuckles and the insides of the palms. When my hands were red and completely flexible, I took them out and dried them. Then I knelt down in one of the stalls with my head over the toilet, thrust one finger down my throat and made myself vomit. That made my body and my head feel light when I stood up. It made me more confident, loose and ready, when I waked out on the stage to the piano, in front of the audience.

If I had timed it right, after I threw up I was ready to go behind the curtains on the stage and wait a few minutes for my turn to go out in front of the audience and sit down at the piano. If I was a little too early I might have to soak my hands again.

My first clue that I had not spent my childhood acting on my own inner voice came in my late twenties, when an old friend of my mother's, someone whose name I had often heard her mention but I had never met, visited my wife Carol and me. Carol was pregnant with Mary, our second child, so it must have been 1958. I was twenty-seven. The visitor mentioned that my mother had been pregnant with me when her friend visited her in Chicago in 1930. She said, "I was so struck that your mother was certain that you were a boy. And that you would be a pianist."

I had grown up hearing that my ear for music, my talent, had manifested itself early in life--when I was about four or five--and after recognizing my gift my parents had dutifully supported my inner destiny, my vocation. I had never doubted the story before, even after I had come to suspect they had overestimated the talent.

But according to my mother's best friend, Mother had known that her son would be a pianist when I was still in the womb? That put a startlingly different light on things. Still, it only raised questions for me there didn't seem any way to answer. And the implications were so out of line with the family history I had grown up with that I just couldn't absorb them. For several years I didn't think much about this story, until the session with the marriage counselor made me recall it.

At that point other conversations came back to me. Some years after Mother died, I had lunch with her older sister Clara, who had paid for my piano lessons. I asked her, "Clara, if Mother had lived, how do you think she would really have reacted if I had quit the piano?"

She thought for a while, eating her food. Then she said, "You couldn't have quit."

I said, "I don't mean when I was a little boy. I mean if she hadn't been killed and I was older, say I went off to college, I was maybe twenty, on my own,. And I decided to quit."

She shook her head and said decisively, "You couldn't have quit."

There was something so final about her tone, and it was such a strange answer to my question that I didn't pursue it. But the next day I was having lunch with her brother, my uncle Lou, and I told him that I had had a strange exchange with Clara the day before. I repeated it to him and asked him what he thought. He thought for a while before answering. Then he said, "Well, I

think Clara is right. You couldn't quit."

"But that's not what I'm asking! I'm asking, what if I did quit, what would be her reaction? What if I just decided to do it?"

"Well, you could have quit, of course. But it would have been at the price of your relationship with your mother. It would have meant totally cutting yourself off from your mother. And you wouldn't have been willing to do that."

According to my half-brother brother Harry, who was eleven years older than me, I did quit, twice that he knew about. It was when he was still living with the family, he said he remembered it well. He says that on two separate occasions, when I was nine or ten, I got fed up with practicing, I got angry, I said that was it, it was over, I wasn't going to do this anymore.

I asked him what happened.

"You became a non-person, as far as Mother was concerned. You just didn't exist. She didn't look at you, or notice you, or answer you if you said anything to her. You would be sitting at the table and ask her to pass something and she wouldn't hear you."

"So what happened?"

"Oh, after a day of this, or a day and a half, you went back to the piano."

I have no memory of any of this, or of ever trying to quit the piano, or wanting to. But three years after the marriage counseling, I remember standing outside the front door of our house in Brentwood, under a canopy of purple bougainvillea, calling my son Robert to come into the house to do something. I was at home in the afternoon, so it must have been a weekend. He was eight years old. He wanted to stay out and play with a friend across the street.

I said to him jokingly, like a stereotype father telling about his own hard childhood, "You know, when I was your age, I couldn't be out playing with my friends in the afternoon. I was practicing all the time." And it struck me, for the first time, that what I had just said was not a joke. How could that have happened? How could my father have let that happen?

I asked myself, what if Carol--my wife, Robert's mother--had insisted that Robert spend hours every afternoon playing the piano, instead of playing outside? Was there a chance in the world that I would have allowed that? Out of the question! Even if I hadn't had that experience myself. Unthinkable.

From that moment on I had some questions to ask of my father, who was now living in Huntington Woods, a suburb of Detroit. On my next trip from Los Angeles to Washington, I scheduled a stop in Detroit and my father met me at the airport. In the taxi on the way home I put questions to him I had never asked before, and for once in our lives he gave me straight answers, as if he had been waiting to be asked.

"What was all that about, all that piano and that practicing?" I asked him. "Why was I doing that?"

"Your mother wanted a pianist," he said. "She was determined you would be a great pianist."

That was it. Nothing about talent, about vocation, about opportunity or destiny, or their duty as parents. Nothing of what I had been told from age five to fifteen, or till this moment, age thirty-one. Nothing but two sentences I had never heard spoken till now.

"Well, what was your impression of why I was doing it, of what I wanted? Didn't you think I was doing it because I wanted to?"

"You were a normal kid, you didn't want to spend all your time inside

playing a piano. You would rather have been outside, or with your nose in a book. But you were a good boy, and you loved your mother. You wanted to do what she wanted."

Simple as that. Well...that left the questions that had come to me in Brentwood.

"How could you have let this happen? Why did you go along? How could you let her make me practice all the time?"

He told me: "Your mother hadn't wanted to have any children at all. That was our agreement when we got married. [He was a widower.] I had two children already, and she was going to help me raise them. But I thought she ought to have children of her own. I thought it would be good for her. Every woman ought to have a child. I made her do it. I persuaded her. So when she had you, I thought I had to let her raise you the way she wanted. She wanted a pianist."

We sat for a while in the taxi in silence. Then he added something. "There was more to it than that. I thought that if I interfered, she might leave me. Your piano was all she cared about, in the marriage."

I said, "So I was working for you, too."

"You could say that."

Yet in the end, in a sense, I did quit. And my mother, it seemed, accepted that: though what effect that might have had on our relationship was not tested long.

The high point, and the end, of my training with Miss M--- came with my performance of the Beethoven Third Concerto with a rented orchestra. It was made up of most of the members of the Detroit Symphony, for which she was the accompanist. It was in the spring of 1945, I was fifteen. It went very well; except that as always during a recital there came a moment--my nightmare--when my mind went blank as to what notes came next. I stopped, couldn't continue, then went back to an earlier break and started again, hoping but not knowing that my fingers and my memory would carry me through this time. They did.

Could this really have happened, was it a dream? Yes, it did happen, in front of the orchestra and the conductor and the audience...but in fact it didn't amount to much, because it occurred during the cadenza when I was playing alone. I started the cadenza again and played it through.

If the orchestra had been playing when I lost track so that I couldn't go back...what then? I couldn't have repeated. Would they have gone on with the piano silent, my hands poised over the keys, waiting for something to come back to me, waiting for an opening to join them, till the end of the movement? Would the conductor have stopped, told them to go back...to where? Without music in front of me to refer to, how could we have coordinated? But that didn't happen. I was judicious, I chose the cadenza to black out. Probably the audience hardly remembered the incident at the end of the performance, when I got a standing ovation, from all my parents' friends, and the conductor congratulated me.

It was after that that my mother took me to be auditioned by a new teacher, Mischa Kottler. He was the musical director of a major radio station in Detroit and he frequently concertized. Mother thought we had gone as far with Miss M--- as she was likely to take me, and it was time to prepare more professionally for a music school and a concert career.

Mother didn't tell me where the money was to come from for these lessons, which would be very much more expensive, but it was 1946, after the war, and Dad was earning a big salary for the first time in his life. [He was chief structural engineer on what was the largest engineering project in the world that year: the buildup of the atomic energy installations at Hanford, Washington.] In fact, I think that Cranbrook had asked him to start contributing to my tuition, reducing my full scholarship, because of his new ability to pay. So lessons wouldn't depend on Aunt Clara and Uncle Lou any more.

Kottler lived and taught in a large house with beautiful rugs, art objects, bookshelves of art books and scores. His piano was a concert grand, in a large living-room. Very different from Miss M---'s little studio. Kottler himself was round, without much hair on a round head and with a warm smile. His hands looked soft and slightly pudgy, somewhat feminine, not heroic, but, as I learned later when he demonstrated different touches on my forearm, there was iron strength under the flesh.

He used a very different hand position from what I had learned under Miss Mannebach, more relaxed and curved, close to the keyboard. One could hardly see his fingers move separately as his hands, like paws, glided back and forth across the keys spilling silken runs and arpeggios. But that was later, as he demonstrated passages for me in my lessons.

On this first meeting, he was to decide whether he would take me on as a student. Money wasn't enough, he had to judge my ability. I had brought much of my music with me, volumes of Chopin Waltzes and Preludes, Beethoven sonatas, Bach, Schumann, so I could show him in the indices which ones I knew. He questioned me on my training and my repertoire. He listened closely as I played pieces he picked out, nodded appreciatively. I thought it had gone well.

At the end he said, "You're a talented pianist. Your technique is very good. You have a good tone, very good feeling, your playing is very musical.

But I won't take you on the understanding that you are preparing for a concert career. You don't have the right preparation for that, and it's too late to acquire it."

It was a matter of repertoire, he said. Mine was entirely too limited. "You know half a dozen Beethoven sonatas," he said. "You should know all of them, or at least have read through them. You should know half a dozen concertos, not just two." (I had learned a Mozart concerto, the Twenty-first, in addition to the Beethoven Third).

Pointing to the volumes I had brought he said, "You should know all this Chopin, all the Bach, not just a dozen pieces. Or you should at least have played them through. You should be able to sight-read them. But you haven't learned to sight-read" (as I had told him, when he questioned me). "That's the trouble, right there. And it's too late for you to learn. You could never catch up. Even in college. You couldn't acquire the repertoire you ought to have by this time."

This was staggering news. It came out of nowhere, after ten years of total commitment, apparently misdirected. He was saying that the decade spent practicing, each year, a handful of pieces for a recital, learning each note by note, perfectly, no mistakes, for eventual performance, had been entirely misplaced. "You shouldn't have been preparing for recitals at all. To prepare you for a serious career, you should have been learning to sight-read, learning harmony, expanding your range, reading through a whole library of music..."

Kottler spoke with total authority, firmly and confidently. He didn't want to leave any false hopes. He was talking about an aspect of the profession that we had heard nothing about, never considered or discussed, speaking with a finality that seemed to leave no room for argument, not with him anyway. We had, it seemed, been coned, up till this moment. It was as if I were being informed as an actor that I was, after all, the wrong gender or race to play the roles I had trained for and rehearsed with an earlier teacher.

"You're already a good pianist," Kottler said. "I would be happy to take you on a student, to learn to play better for your own enjoyment. But only on that understanding. You have no prospect for a concert career, and I wouldn't be training you for that."

Mother looked glum, but said nothing. My own enjoyment? That was not my calling, that was scarcely even related to what I had been preparing for (since the womb, I was later to learn). I had just heard, in the space of two or three minutes, that the single goal I had been pursuing for two-thirds of my life was closed off to me, it had been an illusion for years, the hours of practicing each day had been misspent. I couldn't be what I had understood from my earliest years I was destined to be, the only thing on earth it mattered for me to be. I was free.

I said I thought I would still like to study with him, on that understanding. I was looking at Mother, who was not giving much sign of reaction. He told us to think it over and let him know. We shook hands and left. In the car on the way home Mother and I agreed that he seemed very professional and would be a good teacher for me. It was settled that I would make an appointment to begin lessons with him.

It is astonishing for me to look back on this. I was leaving a concert career behind, a week or two after I had performed a concerto with a symphony orchestra. Actually, Kottler's judgement on repertoire and sight-reading, from a perspective of fifty years, looks quirky, peculiar. Why couldn't I have learned sight-reading starting at fifteen, why was it too late to read through a broad repertoire?

It wasn't, another teacher told me forty years later. He was a first-rate professional I went to for some lessons, my first since I left high school. (I had hardly touched a piano in-between. None of my friends from college on ever knew I had played.) My technique was very good, he said, and my musical sense. "You could play anything you wanted," he said. A concert career had

not been out of my reach at all, if I'd wanted it enough. (Not, presumably, at the top rank. I didn't press him on this, on just how good I might have become.

I was clearly no virtuoso. However, he contradicted my impression, which I'd had since childhood, that you had to be in the very top rank to make a living as a performer.)

What is amazing is that neither Mother nor I, in the presence of Kottler or between ourselves, challenged his judgment. We didn't argue, we didn't look for a second opinion. There was enough plausibility in what he had said about my training to make it unlikely that we would have gone back to Miss M---. But nothing could have been more natural than for me to say, as soon as we'd left Kottler's house without signing on, "That's absurd! Of course I can learn to sight-read, if that's what's needed! If he's not willing to take me on, if he won't give me what I need, we'll find someone who will."

I wouldn't have said that to his face, at fifteen, but I can easily imagine telling it to Mother in the car, if she hadn't said it first. I can hear myself expanding on it forcefully, confidently, because she could be expected to be crestfallen, uncertain about my reaction and the future. I had just been humiliated in front of her, in effect we had both been, by his judgment on the decade of lessons she had taken me to. She would need reassurance, what she needed to hear was not unclear.

And I didn't say it, any of it. What is even more astonishing is that she didn't either.

Maybe my silence was the confirmation, after so many years, that I wasn't really a pianist, after all. But she couldn't have accepted that conclusion so quickly out of the blue. No, looking back over half a century, the suspicion comes to me that Kottler was confirming for her a feeling that might have been growing within her for months or a year or two earlier, her judgment as a pianist who was better than I was, that for all my hard work I wasn't really going to make it as a concert pianist.

There had been little hints of this in the past year, suggestions so odd and out of key with my life up till then that I'd ignored them. She had mentioned a couple of times that I might, after all, in my studies in the music schools to which I was headed—Julliard or Oberlin--become a conductor or a composer.

Conduct? Compose? What was she talking about? That wasn't what she cared about, that wasn't what I had been practicing for since I was five! I'd paid no attention. Those were different careers altogether. I couldn't dream that they would satisfy her. Or me. Maybe they would make me a better, more well-grounded pianist. That must be what she had had in mind, I had thought at the time. But maybe it wasn't.

It was over. Looking back at this, half a lifetime later, a psychoanalyst-friend suggested: What I may have—unconsciously--long imagined could end only if one of us died, or with the death of our relationship, had ended without warning quite suddenly, peacefully. But two months later my mother was dead.

One more part of Dad's story, leading up to the accident:

"For some reason Adele had lost all her spirit that spring. She didn't seem to have any interest in life, all of a sudden. She didn't even have as much interest in your piano playing."

When he told me this—I have no separate memory of it--I had a pretty good idea, one I never mentioned to him, why that would have been true.

"She turned her attention more to the PTA at Gloria's high school. She had just become president of that. But she didn't have much energy for

anything. And she certainly didn't have any time or attention for me. As far as I could see, she had lost all interest in our marriage, in being married.

"And just before we left, there was another thing that was bothering me. I called your mother on the phone from Philadelphia the night I got there, and she mentioned an old beau of hers who had called her from out of town, out of the blue. He wanted to have dinner with her sometime. Now, when your mother and I were going to get married, we made an agreement. I knew she'd had boyfriends, she was over thirty, and I said I would never ask her about anyone before me and I didn't want to hear about any of them. We agreed that neither of us would ever bring up the past, or torment the other about our past private lives.

"So when she said this bozo's name, I thought to myself 'Dolly, Dolly, you are breaking your promise. You swore you would never do this. You're doing this to get under my skin.' [I had heard from some relative that my mother had been called Dolly when she was young. This was the only time I ever heard my father say it.] So on the way back from Philadelphia I had had this on my mind, too. I was pretty blue.

"Well, it was worse than that. Driving that night, and when I was on the road the next day [the Fourth of July], I was thinking she was going to leave me. I was driving her to Denver, and she was going to stay there, with her brother. Why was she taking her sewing machine with her? Going for a month in Denver, what did she need her sewing machine for? She was going to stay there. That's why she was so anxious to meet all Lou's friends at his cocktail party, and why she had to make a good impression on them. She wanted Lou to want her to live there, to be his sister in charge of his socializing, just like her sister Bertha was Lou's business secretary.

"So I was thinking to myself, I'm driving my family to Denver and they're all going to leave me. OK, maybe I'll just drop them off at Lou's and turn around and drive right back, myself. I didn't tell her what I was thinking."

Not a good mood to be driving in. On the basis of that story, along with the rest of it—his exhaustion, Mother's demands that he keep driving, his compliance—what happened wasn't entirely an accident. And I knew more about what had led up to it than he seemed to realize. I was involved. After all, why was Mother acting so depressed, by his account; why was she in the state of mind that had provoked his? Why was she so indifferent to my piano, to the marriage, to living: to everything but getting to Denver in time to launch a new life with her brother? What, or who, might have caused all that?

Why, me, that's who! That's what I heard, when my father told this story. Of course she was depressed, she had to be (though I don't remember being conscious of it then; part of that time I was living away at school). I did it: by giving up, by quitting, in the guise of accepting Kottler's verdict. I've never felt, exactly, guilty about that conclusion, not that I've ever been aware of. Just, in part, responsible. For what followed, as Dad told it.

I've heard that most children who lose parents feel they caused it in some way--feel guilty, which I would say I didn't, consciously--feel that if they had been better or more interesting they would have kept them around. So probably I would have felt this way to some degree anyway, even if I hadn't heard this account. Perhaps I already felt it and what Dad said just explained the feeling for me. But not all children in this situation have such good grounds for their feeling. That's what I still say, to family members when I tell this story. So it seems to me, despite all the assurances I've heard from them, or others, that this is crazy, that there's no real basis to it, I wasn't responsible at all, and so forth.

An interpretation, from my psychoanalyst friend: I grew up fearing that if I told the truth, about who I was and what I really wanted, Mother would lose interest in me and our relationship would be over, and that would be like death. And I wasn't wrong, it turned out. When I did hear a judgment that I wasn't a concert pianist and I chose to accept it, one of us died, right away. Surprise, it wasn't me.

I was alive, alive and free at last. It wasn't so much that I was freed from a concert career (as my thought on waking up from my coma implied): that had already been settled two months earlier. But free as well, unexpectedly, from—what I might have feared--a lifetime of unspoken reproach from my mother, from her sense of her and my failure, her disappointment. Free not too long I supposed. It came at a price, Mother's life. That was a debt that would have to be paid.

These thoughts came after many talks over the years—not in treatment—with a psychoanalyst who became a close friend. We met at a symposium on psychohistory in 1982, hosted by Robert Lifton at his home in Wellfleet, at which I had given a talk on my own evolution from cold warrior to antiwar and antinuclear activist. After the discussion—in which I had mentioned the accident as an afterthought, near the end—she had offered to talk with me about my life, to help me understand it, as I seemed to want. Not professionally, but as a friend, she said, someone who believed in my work and wanted to assist it.

We started at dinner in a restaurant in Wellfleet that evening. Her first question, as she was settling herself at the table, was, "Tell me about your parents. What was your relation with your mother?"

I said, "We were lovers."

She jumped, a little, off her seat. She was very experienced, she was a dozen years older than me, but she wasn't expecting that.. I had never said it before. I was fifty-one at the time

I went on, "Not physically, of course, at all, but in every other way."

I don't think I had ever thought it before, certainly not at the time. When

my mother was alive I hadn't had any lovers, I scarcely knew what the word meant. In two bouts of psychoanalysis I had never used these words, in fact I had never said anything like it. (Nor, with those classical Freudians who showed little interest in my early life after about age ten, had there been much discussion of the accident at fifteen.) But in answering her question at this moment it seemed the obvious way to put it.

We were lovers. What I wanted most in the world was to make her smile, to make her laugh. I wanted her to hug me and say she was proud of me. I'm not sure if she ever said that, she was very sparing with praise, she tended after a performance to tell me what parts needed more work, what I could do better next time. But she did hug me a lot, and tell me I was her darling boy, she loved me. I adored her, I cared only for her, and it seemed to me that she cared only about me, me and my playing.

We were totally absorbed in each other, I told my analyst friend. My life revolved around her, and hers around me. Even when I went off to boarding school, hers was the only opinion of me that mattered, she was the one I wanted to achieve for. She was preoccupied with my piano, but with me too, she was interested in my thoughts and ideas, she laughed at my jokes, I could make her laugh, though she was never one for saying anything funny herself.

My father would tell jokes often, which I have passed on to my sons. When I do that I warn them that they are fated to remember jokes their father told them and to tell them to their sons someday even though they don't think they are very funny. But it was for my mother that I wanted to be funny, not my father. When I learned something interesting or had ideas, it was she I wanted to tell.

She often had headaches, her forehead would be furrowed as she read the Science and Health or sewed, and I would go behind her and reach down with my thumbs and smooth out the two deep frown lines between her eyes, and have her close her eyelids while I did it. Or I would do it from in front,

smooth her forehead with my thumbs.

"And where was your father in all this?" the analyst asked.

"Nowhere. He was out of it." We were the real partners, she and I, there wasn't room for my father, or, it seemed to me, my sister either. He was off to the side, a little wistfully it seemed sometimes, but on the whole absorbed in his job. My sister was behind him, an afterthought, as I recalled it. She wasn't a pianist. Mother and I were the pair.

"Did that make you feel nervous, or guilty, to cut him out like that, to take his place?"

"Maybe. I don't remember worrying about it at the time. Maybe a little."

On the day the last page of corrected copy on my book Papers on the War was handed to my publisher in 1972, I wrote a page of acknowledgements, ending with one I didn't show my wife until the book was printed. It was to "my partner, lover and closest friend, Patricia." That was true then and it is still true today thirty-six years later. But it was true of my mother while she lived, though I knew nothing of lovemaking then but the palms of my hands on her forehead and her kiss on mine before I went to sleep.

This is who died, the person I lost, on the Fourth of July when I was fifteen. And--here is a mystery, one of the things I still wanted to understand--this is the woman for whom, along with her daughter, my sister, I never grieved, not an hour or a tear, from the day they were killed.¹

Not, at least, from the time I can remember, which starts just thirty days after the accident. My memory is continuous from that time on, and for the years and hours up to the crash, but there remains a thirty-day gap of near-total amnesia. I was conscious and talking to people throughout that period, but a

day after it ended I asked my aunt visiting me if she had just come back to Denver. She was astonished and said she had been talking to me nearly every day for the past month. That turned out to be true for other visitors, none of whom I could remember at all.

That included my father and my brother, who—Harry told me later--were in Denver for the funeral of Mother and Gloria and visited me in the hospital in my first days there. (They went back to Detroit, and I didn't see either of them again until I left the hospital three months later. My father told me later that he was ashamed to visit me; he said he was afraid that I would never forgive him. My brother said that twice during that summer he found my father in the bathroom vomiting blood. Harry thought my father must have a hemorrhaging ulcer and that he might die from it, because as a Scientist he wouldn't see a doctor. But it stopped before I got back.) The memories of that month didn't come back over the rest of the summer, and they never have.

I described this once once to a specialist in post-traumatic stress. I had always assumed that amnesia was a natural consequence of the trauma, especially the concussion that put me in coma for thirty-six hours. But he said no, amnesia was common for the moments before the trauma and perhaps for hours or a few days afterwards, but not for thirty days. That was something else, very unusual. He commented that some heavy grieving may have taken place during that thirty days. Anyway, not after that.

I remember waking in the hospital from my coma, hearing that my mother and sister were dead, thinking only the untoward thought "Now I won't have to be a pianist" before sinking back into darkness. Then, except for a few moments, nothing until my amnesia ends, then...life commenced again, in the hospital and later in school and college and the rest of my life, on a new track, with no thought to speak of for the people who were missing.

No tears, then or ever. No conscious mourning. No feelings of sadness, no thought of regrets or anguish, no sorrow either for them or for myself, what I

had lost. My mother, who had been the pole-star of my life for fifteen years, vanished from my thoughts (with the gap of a month) from one day to the next.

It wasn't as if I never cried about anything. All my life, tears often came to my eyes, at a sad moment or a happy ending in a movie, or at certain points (like my father) when I was telling a story. But never, not once, on those rare occasions when I had to tell someone that my mother and sister had been killed in an accident. I always put that out matter-of-factly, without any feeling of emotion. No one ever commented to me on that, but I was aware of it myself, and sometimes wondered about it.

I thought of as something odd, puzzling, not to be admitted. I felt a little uneasy about it, slightly ashamed, before I would push the thought away. It wasn't something I wanted others to be aware of, I knew they might react to it much more strongly than I did, and I couldn't explain it myself. I was sure that people—especially those who knew about the piano-playing—would interpret the absence of mourning as a memory of bitterness toward my mother, hostility: as if I hadn't loved her, and she hadn't loved me. I knew that was the opposite of the truth.

This particular puzzle was resolved for me at the same Wellfleet gathering where I met my analyst friend. I was introduced by Lifton to his own studies and others' on the survivor syndrome, a set of characteristics generally shared by those who have lost friends or relatives suddenly in an "absurd," catastrophic way, like Hiroshima, the Johnstown flood or some other major accident or natural disaster. They applied especially when the survivors have come close to sharing death themselves, a "death immersion." (Somewhat oddly, I didn't usually think of the accident in just that way, with respect to my own experience. As Patricia once observed, "You talk about the accident in terms of your mother's death, and Gloria's, as though you didn't come close to dying yourself.")

Among these almost-universal survivor symptoms, I learned, is aborted grieving, an "inability to mourn": usually accompanied by some guilt or reticence about this very absence. Another is "paradoxical guilt" over surviving when others did not, an exaggerated or unfounded (in the eyes of others! I feel like saying) sense of responsibility for the tragedy, and, often, a lifelong determination to warn others against a like fate.

Meanwhile, I never regretted the lack of suffering. I was grateful for it. I enjoyed the feeling I did have, which, even in the hospital and all the more when I was released, was...free. It was uncomfortable in the hospital lying in bed for months in a cast up to my waist, but nothing was demanded of me, I could read, practice magic tricks, learn musical scores, listen to disk jockies, joke with visitors. When I went back to school in the fall it was really no different, it was even better. No more recitals to look forward to in June. It was endless summer; I was on vacation, all the time.

I was free to do whatever I wanted, every hour, every day. ("It was air/And playing," says Dylan Thomas, "lovely and watery/And fire green as grass.") It was wonderful. Everything, nearly everything was fun. Interesting, pleasurable. There were demands of schoolwork, but I liked the courses and loved the reading, it was easy to excel, I wanted to do what I was doing, nearly all of it. The pressure was off. It was all play.

In memory of my mother, I kept taking lessons for my last two years in high school—I quit when I went to college--but I practiced much less, and I played things that I enjoyed—like Clair de Lune, too sentimental for Miss M---' recitals—or that my classmates would appreciate. I won a talent contest with Bumble Boogie (interestingly, the piece in the movie Shine, that marks David Helfgott's return to performing in a bar, after years of schizophrenia). I played the piano for school performances of Gilbert and Sullivan. When I quit for good (after an excruciating freshman course in harmony and

composition—again, in memory of my mother--which took forty hours of work a week) I had four to six extra hours a day to do with as I wanted.

At the same time I continued for years to have brief feelings of unease, of guilt, when I was doing something I liked at times when, in earlier years, I would have been practicing. As before, pleasures taken in time not spent practicing were guilty pleasures, though not less pleasurable for that. But at last the guilt wore away, along with the feeling that this freedom was something special, forbidden, self-indulgent, and all that was left was the wonderful freedom, the sense I was in command of my time and my life.

It seemed for a long while that this feeling of endless vacation, this happiness, might last for the rest of my life. It lasted a long time, most of the next eighteen years I would say, till about the time my first wife asked for a divorce. I went to Washington, to the Pentagon, and that summer I became immersed in Vietnam, for the next ten years

* * *

I am listening—fifty years have passed since the Accident-- to a CD of David Helfgott, pianist-hero of the movie Shine, playing the Rachmaninov Third Concerto. The piece, the movie says, his Polish-Jewish father urged on him "too soon," the piece he performed at the Royal Albert Hall just before going mad for a decade. He is approaching the end. In a few moments, I know from the program notes on the CD, he will play a piece I have not heard for half a century, Rachmaninov's Prelude in C sharp minor. "The Bells of Moscow" people call it. I was to hear that I bought the disk.

I used to hear it all the time in my childhood, it was the most played music

in our household. It was my Mother's favorite piece, and she always played it sooner or later when she sat down at the piano, when I wasn't using it. Sometimes she would perform it when we had company. She did it very well, with amazing strength and bravura. We never got tired of it.

I never learned it. I tried once, but it was too hard, and I didn't try very long. It was her piece anyway. Now Helfgott is playing it, I'm hearing it for the first time since she died. It sounds familiar, it sounds like home. (Tears come to my eyes now, as I write that).

But the triad of descending chords that starts it and is repeated over and over doesn't sound to me like bells, it never has. It sounds like what it always did to me, the footsteps of Death, or of God, God as Death. The last chord especially, the descending fifth; it rings on the floor like the commanding knock of a staff, a long scepter, in the grip of a god of death.

The program notes, I read, say that it "evokes memories of the dramatic burning of Moscow and the chiming of church bells." Ah, that's more like it, burning churches in a deserted city, bells chiming, yes, before they fall along with timbers into flaming gutters. Strange tunes to run through my childhood. Like going to bed with Bergmann's figure of Death for a stuffed animal. The lowest chord hits the floor again, the sound of doom.

Lines by Neruda come into my head: "Tonight I can write the saddest lines..." They bring tears. I am sixty-five years old. Can I be crying at last, for my mother? "Tonight I can write the saddest lines. / I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too "

Sometimes? No, no, not just sometimes. I find a volume of Neruda on the shelf to read the poem. Every line strikes home.

"Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.

..."My soul is not satisfied that it has lost her."

..."Love is so short, forgetting is so long."

Oh, now I'm crying for sure. Over these words, which are my feelings for Mother, my lost love. For the first time in fifty years, the first time in my life, it feels to me that I am crying over my mother's death, grieving, crying for myself, for my loss of my mother, the first and longest love of my life, until Patricia.

END NOTE

¹ Not from the time I can remember, which starts just thirty days after the accident. My memory is continuous from that time on, and for the years and hours up to the crash, but there is a thirty-day gap of near-total amnesia. I was conscious and talking to people throughout that period, but a day after it ended I asked my aunt visiting me if she had just come back to Denver. She was astonished and said she had been talking to me nearly every day for the past month. That turned out to be true for other visitors, none of whom I could remember at all. The memories didn't come back over the rest of the summer, and they never have.

The relevance here is that I described it once to a specialist in post-traumatic stress, the psychiatrist David Spiegel. I had always assumed that amnesia was a natural consequence of the trauma, especially the concussion that put me in coma for 36 hours. But he said no, amnesia was common for the moments before the trauma and perhaps for hours or a few days afterwards, but not for thirty days. That was something else, very unusual. He commented that some heavy grieving may have taken place during that thirty days. Anyway, not after that.

At the same seminar in 1982, at Wellfleet under Robert Lifton and Erik Erikson, where I met the analyst described above, Dr. Margaret Brenman-Gibson, I was introduced to the work of Lifton

and others on the "survivor syndrome," a set of characteristics generally shared by those who have lost friends, relatives, in an "absurd," traumatic way, as in Hiroshima, the Jonestown flood, or a major accident or natural disaster, especially when the survivors have come close to sharing death themselves.

At the top of the list of these symptoms, I learned, is aborted grieving, an "inability to mourn" (usually accompanied by some guilt or reticence about this very absence). Another is "paradoxical guilt" over surviving when others did not, an exaggerated or unfounded sense of responsibility for the tragedy and a determination to warn others against a like fate. A lot of the specific descriptions sounded pretty familiar to me; they put into a wholly new light some of my own experience.

Later in that second session with the marriage counselor, I had the kind of breakthrough insight that used to occur in Hollywood movies about psychoanalysis, a kind that never happened again during several later years of analysis. Also a breakdown into unstoppable crying, the first of several in my life, though never again in therapy.

As an analogy to something else I was discussing with him, I recalled something I'd never told anyone about before. My mother, wanting me to be somewhat well-rounded and not just a pianist or student, had enrolled me in tennis lessons with a well-known coach in Hamtramck, the Polish enclave in Detroit. Her students were mostly poor Polish kids who didn't have any money for lessons, and she worked them very hard. Me, too. I was supposed to add hours of tennis practice to my hours of piano practice, though only in the summer, of course, when there was time for both.

And although most of the kids who were learning along with me went on to become national champions in indoor competition, which was her specialty, I was as good as they were in our starting stages. When we would rally for practice, sometimes for a long time, my shots were as good as theirs, and I was as likely to win a point or a game as they were when we started playing sets.

But when we neared the climax of a set, or a match, a peculiar thing happened. My game collapsed. I began uncontrollably hitting balls into the net or even over the fence. In effect, I threw the match, nearly every time; and especially if my mother was watching. Nothing like that ever happened to me when I was competing scholastically or on the piano, or playing a recital. It came into my head as I was talking to the counselor because it was analogous to another phenomenon I had been discussing with him, both of these very uncharacteristic of my experience. Both examples of an almost deliberate, yet out-of-control failure.

And in the case of the tennis, I could think of an explanation. (I don't think I had consciously thought of this before, though I might have). In the end, my mother didn't really care whether I was an outstanding tennis player, or even a tennis player at all. Nothing mattered to her but the piano; and secondarily, excelling in school. So it didn't really matter if it turned out that tennis just wasn't my thing.

On the other hand, if I had tried my hardest to win, with some evidence of talent, and then had lost anyway: that she wouldn't like or respect, that would be dangerous. Almost as bad, if I turned out to have real talent and was successful competitively, it was just possible that I would end up having to work almost as hard at tennis as at the piano. There was no question of tennis supplanting the piano, just a bare possibility that if I were too good at it, it might be added, as a second vocation.

So it just wasn't worth it, to succeed competitively in tennis or even to make a respectable try at it. At best I couldn't win much (the only place it counted, in my mother's eyes) but I could be humiliated, or newly obligated. In the case of piano, I

couldn't avoid taking the chance of humiliating, crushing failure, annihilation, loss of my relationship with my mother, because I would suffer the same fate if I didn't compete. I couldn't afford either to lose or to evade the contest in that arena.

But I wasn't compelled to take on tennis as well, on the same basis. I could evade the opposed risks either of being second-rate in tennis, or of being first-rate.

Before I got close to losing (or winning) a hard-fought match, I would "lose it," blow it, demonstrate a spectacular inaptitude for competition tennis. And indeed, it didn't bother Mother much. I drifted out of Mrs. Hoxie's discipline (in a way I could never do with Miss Mannebach). (I did make the varsity tennis team at Cranbrook as the only sophomore listed, but as the eleventh man on a ten-man team, a substitute who rarely played. Before my junior year I broke my leg in the accident).

My interpretation to the marriage counsellor was that instead of giving my all in tennis in order to be a success and please my mother, and possibly fail, I would just throw the match, blow it, fall apart, demonstrate incurable incompetence. Because tennis, unlike the piano, was an arena where I didn't have to be judged and I preferred not to be judged (by myself or a stranger) and fail. Get it over with, in a way that wasn't available to me in piano, where I couldn't quit.

My interpretation might or might not have been valid, and likewise the analogy I saw (with an aspect of my relations with women). But what I experienced as I began to apply it in the case of my relations with women was real, all right. I suddenly, unforeseeably, began to sob, with an intensity and an abruptness that was like a scream. Nothing like this had ever happened before and it's happened only a handful of times since. [Note, April 20, 2000: What is relevant to my larger narrative is the insight that follows here, not the preceding anecdote which triggered the insight, and which did so by contrast, not by analogy. Thus, on grounds of interest and space, the story about tennis is very unlikely to be included in later drafts, though I'm leaving it in here. To anticipate the metaphor below, the contrast was that tennis was a game--with aspects of Russian roulette, in terms of my relations with my mother--that I didn't have to play, so I didn't; despite some talent and some pleasure in it, I blew it off. But as I mention below, the piano was like a game of Russian roulette that I was forced to play, over and over; I "couldn't quit"--or so it seemed-- so long as we both were alive.]

For the first time in my life, at 27, it came into my awareness that I had been continuously afraid of losing my mother's love throughout my childhood. I had lived with the fear--or the knowledge--that I would lose her interest in me and her love, which would be like death, if I had quit the piano or when I finally failed as a concert pianist.

Talking about the fact that I could afford to fail at tennis without losing my mother's love brought into sight at the same moment the other side of that coin: that that was not true, it had never been true, for playing the piano.

I realized suddenly for the first time, in that office at the Institute of Family Relations, that I had been working for my mother, all those long hours of practicing, child labor beyond the reach of any protective laws, working to maintain her interest in me and her love. In fear of death, death of her love and our relationship and a meaningful life for me.

But that labor was the least of it. I knew how to practice, how to work hard at it, how to take apart and polish and repeat, how never to be satisfied, how to experiment; I could be sure of being good enough at practicing. But for Miss Mannebach the practicing was all aimed at public performances or at recitals where the competition was with musical standards in the ears and minds of oneself, teacher, mother, audience. That was her advertising, how she got new students.

Every time you stepped out on that stage before the public, you could fail decisively, irrevocably. Oh, a single mistake, even a bad performance could be recovered from, could be redeemed later, if you were sufficiently self-reproachful and redoubled your efforts to do it right.

But there was always a risk that you would reveal yourself in a performance to be not a promising pianist, after all, not really a talent worth investing a teacher's efforts or a mother's attention and hopes and love on. To inspire that conclusion in my mother would be sudden death.

Those were the stakes in every major recital. That danger couldn't be avoided just by willpower and diligence and effort, which were enough to keep hopes alive indefinitely in the course of practicing. You could fail definitively in a recital, and you couldn't indefinitely avoid the recitals. You had to take the chance, the gamble with death. It was a forced game of Russian Roulette.

I recall my extreme hostile reaction to the movie The Deer Hunter because of its theme of Russian Roulette, either forced or as a gambling sport. In the movie, the Viet Cong force their captives, on pain of death, to play Russian Roulette with each other. Later, Saigon civilians are shown betting on Americans and Vietnamese who play Russian Roulette in front of them.

I felt very emotionally when I saw the movie that both of these scenes--which had no basis in Vietnamese reality, either in Communist prisons or gambling habits in Vietnam (the plot had been lifted from a purely fictional script set in the Bahamas)--were vicious slanders on Vietnamese character. No real culture in the world, I pointed out to others furiously, actually imposed or enjoyed literal Russian Roulette as either a sport, a gamble or a torture. The conservative, pro-war moviemakers were slanderously presenting Vietnamese, both South and North, as excited by the possibility or spectacle of seeing someone blow his brains out in front of them, or risk it.

My reaction may have reflected that perhaps the idea of being forced to play Russian Roulette and even doing it as a performance for an audience, some of whom were betting on you, was not all that new to me. It's interesting that my reaction to it when I saw the film was that it was one of the worst charges you could make against people, to show them as capable of forcing others to gamble with their lives as torture or for the entertainment of an audience.

I think of three more instances of the notion of Russian Roulette or ultimate risk-taking appearing in my life. My honors thesis at Harvard was on the subject of "Decisionmaking Under Uncertainty" and my Ph.D. thesis was on "Risk, Ambiguity and Decision." Both of these conceptualized all risk-taking from personal and business decisions to matters of war and peace as forms of gambling behavior.

My Ph.D. thesis included as an appendix a paper I had given at the Econometric Society meetings entitled, "Winning At Russian Roulette." (!) It argued that certain formal decision-criteria could imply that player choosing an "optimal" strategy might, under varying conditions, put one, two, or three or more bullets in the chamber before spinning it. (This was presented ironically, as a tacit critique of the realism of these particular decision-making criteria.)

Finally, in a fiction-writing course as a sophomore at Harvard, as a self-imposed exercise I wrote a series of very short stories, each a page or a page and a half long. One of these was about a man who gets up alone in a single room, grooms himself carefully, and then, as a ritual performed every morning for a generation before he goes out, spins the chamber on a service revolver, puts it to his head and pulls the trigger. Once more, it fails to go off, and he wraps it up, puts it away and leaves for the day.

The story mentions that he realizes that since the revolver has never fired in thousands of tries, the chances are very strong that the firing pin is broken or the bullets have become inert. But he has never checked this, so the ritual still works for him.

Nothing is said about what this does for him. Does his self-esteem or equilibrium depend on: confirming his invulnerability, his immortality? On winning a bet, being destiny's tot? On redeeming, by a gamble with death, the sins of the day before, or the day to come, or a lifetime, or a particular crime of the past? Assuaging guilt feelings about any of these? Proving undiminished daring, masculinity? Golly, there could be so many good reasons for what he does, no wonder I didn't try to pin it down.}

I saw all that later when I reflected on my crying jag at the counseling session. But in that session, I simply became conscious belatedly that I had worked very hard for a decade and more to earn a mother's love, and yet at frequent peril of losing it.

I don't think I felt sorry for myself, then or later. (Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe what I felt was sorrow, for the boy I had been). [April 20, 2000: I start to cry as I re-read that sentence. Maybe there's something to it.] I was aware even then how much worse it could have been for me, even without moving my upbringing to the ghetto or Calcutta. I

could have been one of the many for whom a mother's love wasn't available on any terms. Or I could have failed to earn it.

I could have lacked the minimum talent needed to arouse her hopes. That was the situation I saw my sister in. She was given some lessons, but she was a rotten pianist, no talent at all, so she was let off with no questions asked. She certainly wasn't unloved, but I took it for granted that she didn't have a chance at capturing the attention I got from Mother. But maybe my feeling of having the inside track, being the favored one, was largely a way of not noticing that I was working an awful lot harder than Gloria for what I was getting. I don't even know what she did with all the time I was practicing and she wasn't.

I had earned the love, I had been loved, and I knew it. So why was I suddenly crying so hard? It might seem illusionary to try to recapture feelings from a moment 37 years ago, which would have been hard to articulate at the time, but it actually seems to me that I can identify some of them.

Fatigue and relief and painful awareness. Belated awareness of a long, long strain and suppressed fear. Relief from no longer carrying a very heavy burden, and relief from the fear that it might break me; relief and horror at a sudden awareness of the dangers I had survived, the risks I had run so often for so long.

It was as if mists cleared and you found that you had been walking near a precipice, or at the end of a long drive in the mountains you discovered that your brakes or steering had been near to failing. A letting into awareness of a long-endured and long-repressed sense of danger and dread, and of strain and fatigue. And finally, the sense that you should have known this all before, that in some way you did know it, but you allowed yourself to be fooled and blinded, you fooled yourself. Shame.

A lot to cry about. The crying was like panting at the end of a marathon. I cried for the rest of the hour, hardly able to gasp out the thoughts that were coming to me. When Carol took my place with the counselor at the end of the hour, I went outside and walked around and around the block for the next hour, still sobbing.